

No Need to Worry
Matthew 6:25-34
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One of Molly's favorite books is "Wemberly Worried" by Kevin Henkes. Wemberly is a little worry-wart. The book says, "Wemberly worried about everything. Big things, little things, and things in between. Wemberly worried in the morning, she worried at night, and she worried throughout the day. She worried about the tree in the front yard (what if it falls on our house?), the crack in the living room wall (what if it gets bigger and something comes out?), and the noise the radiator made (what if there's a snake inside?)."

Wemberly obviously never read the sixth chapter of Matthew. While Jesus is giving the Sermon on the Mount, he shares a few lessons for Wemberly: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear, or about your living room wall or what's in your radiator. Do not worry."

This is one of those "yeah but" passages for me. Sometimes I read something Jesus says and I say, "Yes, Lord. You got it. Preach it, Messiah!" And then other times I'll read something, scratch my head, and say, "Yeah, but..." "Sell all you have and give it to the poor." Yeah, but... "You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth." Yeah, but... "Do not worry." Yeah, but...

On the surface, Jesus' words seem almost irresponsible and dismissive of the difficulty of life. It's like the Bobby McFerrin song that was so popular in the late 1980s. "Here's a little song I wrote, you might want to sing it note for note. Don't worry, be happy." Easy for you to sing when you've got hit song that sounds like it was written by a second-grader.

How can we not worry? The very virtue of being alive produces worry in us. We worry about our finances, our kids, our health. I read recently that a scientific study has proven that worrying about getting cancer...causes cancer. We live in a world that creates and nurtures opportunities to worry on a daily basis.

In fact, you could argue that worrying is a part of the very fabric of who we are. John Ortberg talked about a New York Times Magazine article that said worrying could actually be genetic. There's a certain gene that has both a short and a long version. People with the short version are more prone to fear and anxiety. People with the long version seem to not worry as much. Now, are you worrying that you have the shorter version?

The examples Jesus lifts up to keep us from worrying don't help me much. He talks about how God cares for the birds of the air and clothes the flowers in the field. But I've accidentally weed-whacked enough flowers and hit enough birds with my car to know that not all of them live to their fullest potential. So how can Jesus, speaking to a group of people who probably were struggling to make ends meet, say with a straight face, "Do not worry"?

I think we should consider where our worry comes from, because I believe that's at the heart of what Jesus is getting at here. There is rational concern, and then there is worry. Someone once said that worry is fear that has unpacked its bags and signed a long-term lease. When our concern begins to contaminate our thinking and control our

lives, it has become polluting and negative, and we become Wemberly Worried, whose life was controlled by what she was afraid of.

As human beings with free will, there's a lot in our lives over which we have control. We control which bills get paid, what food goes into our bodies, and how we react to certain situations. We control the temperature of our house, the position of the seat in our car, and which channel the TV is on, unless we have kids. Especially in our affluent culture, there are a lot of things we control.

But even here, there are a lot more things over which we don't have control. We don't have control over the aging of our bodies, no matter how much we exercise and take pills and replace joints. We don't have control over the economy or the price of gasoline. And we don't have control over what other people think and do. And yet, we still worry about these things.

One commentator I read this week went so far as to say worrying was a sin. At first I said, "Yeah, but..." Worrying, a sin? That seems a bit harsh. But then I thought, "If sin is anything that separates us from God, would worrying fall into that category?" Which immediately made me start worrying that I worry too much. If worry isn't a sin, it's at the very least unfaithful, because at its most fundamental level, worry is a lack of trust in God's provision and care.

Rick Warren says, "Worry is the warning light that God has been shoved to the sidelines." And it causes us to do one of two things: It either paralyzes us and keeps us from moving forward and gives us ulcers, or it makes us try and take things into our own hands, which usually ends up badly. Jesus says to the crowd, "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them." In other words, the pagan, the unfaithful, the non-believer is characterized by their worldly pursuits, their obsession with eliminating worry from their lives by filling it with things.

But for believers, we are called to a higher level of trust than that. That's what Jesus is talking about here. If God cares for a bird, if God cares for a flower that's here today and gone tomorrow, how much more will God care for us? We are more than what we eat or what we wear or where we live. We may care for ourselves and care for others, but God cares for us all. We live by God's grace.

Now, let me pause right there, because you're probably thinking what I was thinking, which is, "Yeah, but..." If we live by God's grace, why are people still living out of cardboard boxes? Why do we need oncologists and chemotherapy and overflowing medicine cabinets? We think God has failed us because our world still gives us plenty of reasons to worry.

But God never promised to take away our fears. God promised to help us overcome them. The truth is there will always be something to worry about, if we so choose. When we were baptized or made our confession of faith, we were not promised an easy life. What we are promised is the endless, unrelenting, unconditional, loving care of God over every aspect of our lives. And that, Jesus says, is why we shouldn't worry. Our attitude should be defined, not by what we see, but how we see it and respond to it. A crisis can be an obstacle or an opportunity. A difficulty can be a roadblock or a lesson. We choose how to respond to life; we control that. We can worry, or we can trust.

As usual, Jesus gives us the blueprint for how to do this. "Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you, as well." Worry

starts to consume us when we take our focus off the priority of loving and serving God. If we truly believe that God is God, then we trust that no matter what happens, whether it's good or bad, whether it's what we wanted or not what we wanted, God is with us, loving us, holding us up, encouraging us.

We all have plenty of opportunities to worry; that's life. We've all had times in our lives when we've thought, "I'll never get through this. Things will never be the same. My life has changed forever." We lose someone we love, and life changes. We get a diagnosis, and life changes. We get downsized from our job, and life changes. If you've gone through those things or something like it, you know that feeling of despair, hopelessness, paralyzing worry.

Let me give you a more light-hearted example. In the public speaking class I teach, I usually get a number of students who are petrified of public speaking. The first night of class, they have the word "anxiety" written on their foreheads. They are already worrying about how they are going to pass the class. Then their teacher tells them he's a pastor, which usually doesn't help things.

So I do a few things. First, I tell them that just because I'm a minister, if they fail a speech, that doesn't mean they are going to Hell. Second, I have them come up to the front of the class in groups of threes to present each other. Then, when everyone is finished, I have them take their pulse. To this day, after six years of teaching, I've yet to have a student who didn't have a pulse. In other words, everyone has survived.

So have you. You know what it's like to be in the valley, don't you? I've been there with some of you. It's scary down there. You feel at times like you won't make it out. But guess what? You're here. You made it this far, didn't you? You may not be the same person you were, but you are here. We've been enabled to bear the unbearable and do the undoable and pass the breaking point, but not break. That's God's grace at work.

We don't always control what happens to us, but we do control how we respond to it. We can respond to it with worry, or we can respond with trust, trust that the God who feeds the birds and clothes the flowers also looks out for us. That doesn't mean it will always be easy, but it does mean we will never be alone. Seek first God's kingdom in your life, and you may just find you don't have as much to worry about.